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The problems pile up

Jobless in Kentucky

Powell County suffers more than most

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STANTON - Sixteen-and-a-half million bricks are stacked high in the yard in front of Hanson Brick, where the kilns have been cold since December. Originally, the idea was to lay off employees only for the time it took to clear the yard of all that inventory. No use extruding and baking more brick if you had no place to put it.

Three months without work and then you'll be back, the 25 hourly employees were told in December.

The mountain of bricks has gone mostly nowhere.

Not that long ago, when houses were being built at a healthy clip in this country, the brickyard was lucky to keep 1 1/2 million bricks in the yard at a time so the trucks that waited in long lines to be loaded would be sure to have something to go home with.

At full capacity, plant superintendent Jeff Brewer says, Hanson Brick would make 65 million bricks a year. In 2007 and 2008, it was at half that capacity. In 2009, it has yet to make a brick and, says Brewer, it might be July or August before that "several months of inventory on the ground" gets moved and he can think about what's next.

"A lot of us in the brick business knew a slowdown was coming," he says, "but none anticipated that it would be this bad."

The unemployment rate in Powell County, home to 3,715, has risen 4.1 percentage points in one year - one of the biggest jumps of any county in the state. That makes the county's overall unemployment rate a double-digit affair now, at 10.7 percent through January.

The Hanson Brick plant is unusually hushed. Brewer walks outside in the drizzly rain and talks about how the bricks will be fine in the spring wet, especially now that plastic bands have replaced the old bands that used to rust and stain the brick. He is having a hard time speaking about the employees he has had to let go. He says he knows they are stretching far to make ends meet.

He explains how he used to be a city councilman here and knows that the county is struggling as a whole. The people who live here, he says, love where they live.

It's a bedroom community, where more workers are employed outside the county than in it.

Many, he says, are employed by factories in the deeply troubled textile and automotive markets and the suddenly weak building trades.

That's why a lot of people outside the county don't realize that the news Wednesday of the 450 job losses at factories in Clark County or the news last month of the closing of Bath

Manufacturing is bad news for those counties, of course, but also for the children and future of Powell County.

Beating the bushes

Sammy Aylen wasn't in the first round of those laid off at Burke Parsons Bowlby Corp., a plant that makes pressure-treated wood products for building purposes.

Based in Stanton's old railroad depot, the plant has had little activity since 22 workers were let go almost a year ago, when the company began eliminating certain product lines. Round two of the layoffs came in October, with seven more gone. That's when Aylen got the word. Again.

"I'd worked there three times and I was laid off three times," Aylen said. "They was great, though, until they sold the plant to a Canadian company. First thing they said was our jobs were safe. Next thing, they made cuts. It was pretty rough."

Aylen has been beating the bushes for work. He says he's "not good on computers," so mostly he's looking for manual work. Looked into some woodworking, some electrical, reported back to unemployment. In February, he applied at A.O. Smith Electrical Products Co. in Mount Sterling "on Thursday, they called me Friday and I started working Monday."

That lasted two weeks. Then they had to lay him off, too.

Of course, he could be called back to that one sometime as well. He liked the work.

He says he takes his unemployment status "day by day. I hope for the best. I have faith."

Mostly, he has faith that things will turn **up**. Faith, too, that he won't get sick, because he has no health insurance, can't afford it, knows that's dumb, keeps hoping that things turn around.

He says his small house with the dog run out back is his homeplace, and even though a lot of family has moved away from the area, he won't unless he absolutely has to in order to eat.

For now, he will work on the house, trim his June apple trees - "they make good frying apples," he says - and puppy-sit his grown son's 10-week-old blue-eyed husky. And continue to look for work.

"Summertime's coming," Aylen, 42, says. "You can always find some work in the summer if you're not afraid of heat."

Signs of the times

On the road between Stanton and Clay City, Cintas' Powell County Manufacturing plant loiters in its parking lot. The loading dock is alive, but only with the sound of a split canopy that whips with the wind and rain.

The Clay City Times had a full-page list of foreclosures in last week's paper. The editor, James Cook, says he never used to have more than two foreclosures at a time.

He says those in the county who have family in the county will be OK. But he fears that those who don't will find that hard times are coming, if they have not arrived already.

Out in front of the Hard Times Thrift Shop on the road between Powell County's two biggest towns, hand-me-down clothes are priced low and handmade furniture is priced high. Generosity and ingenuity working together for common goals.

Filling the cupboards

Five years ago, the Powell County Emergency Food Bank served just 17 families. But not many in the county knew then that if you drew less than \$1,127 a month in government benefits, you were eligible to come through with a grocery basket and help yourself to fresh potatoes and day-old bread, peanut butter and beans, macaroni and, on this day, a carton of Peeps for the kids. Only three months ago, the number of families helped by the bank hovered around 300. The number in February was more like 350.

Rose Hall, co-chair of the food bank, created by local churches, lets in the first in line on Wednesday morning. Because it's only the second Wednesday of the month, the line is not so staggering. Later in the month, she says, things will get more desperate as cupboards get more bare and money runs out.

Loreen Muncie, who doesn't have a job, has come down before the doors open at 10 a.m. Her son's job in heating and air conditioning is in jeopardy, she says, because "people can't afford to pay him."

She begins to describe in a few words the **problem** with the economy: "If nobody has money, nobody gets paid. Then there just ain't much work to find," she says.

She moves on quickly to complain about other things dragging on the county dollar: drugs and the lack of anything to do for the kids. Old concerns. Chronic. Familiar. Overlaid now with fresh worry.

Most in the line don't want to give their names. Some are supplementing their government benefits. All are looking to have enough food in their houses.

Enough is all that many of them have ever known.

In a few, however, there used to be plenty.

Training for new start

Susan Watson and Christie Casey had crossed paths before, after Cintas closed its Powell County manufacturing plant a few years ago. Casey had been to the Powell County Adult Education Center but just "hadn't been into" improving her education, she says. So she transferred to the Cintas facility in Bath County to continue to make uniforms.

It was work she liked and did well for almost 14 years.

Then that facility closed. Watson, director of the adult education center, had tried to warn everyone in earshot years before that the textile industry wasn't staying. That all that was going overseas. That they needed to get retrained.

Quite a few who've been laid off over the years have listened to Watson. In fact, in 2003, the Sanmina-SCI factory closed in Stanton, putting 125 people out of work. Of those, she nabbed 70 into her classes; eventually, eight earned college degrees.

She did the same thing with the people at Cintas' Bath Manufacturing plant. In fact, Cintas called her to come talk to its employees before they were let go.

And in the crowd was Casey.

"All right," thought Watson, "I got her now."

"I knew I had to get my GED," says Casey, who had a ninth-grade education. If for no other reason, "it's the money."

Her husband has a job, but she has two kids, one about to enter college. The income she brings in is necessary.

In addition to the GED, she needed something called a Kentucky employability certificate. That was before she could start thinking about college applications.

In less than six weeks, she has crammed it all in. "Going to work," she says, "was probably easier."

She admits that she probably would not have left her job if she hadn't been forced to. Still, her college tuition will be funded through the Office of Employment Training, and her unemployment benefits will continue as long as she is in school. She probably will have to travel to Lexington to attend Bluegrass Community and Technical College, though she is still undecided.

Watson hates having to send every one of her successes out of the county to get better educations.

"We're an undereducated, distressed community," she says. "How will you battle this issue with education? How will you do it if it's not accessible?"

She and interested others calling themselves the Powell County Higher Education Development Board have been meeting since August. They have written a mission statement aimed at creating a secondary education facility for vocational, technical and liberal arts education. They've hired an architectural firm and done the numbers. They need \$13 million. They are determined to make it happen.

"Otherwise," says Watson, "we continue to suffer."

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Coming monday

Last of a four-part series: A Lexington man reaches out with humor to job searchers online.